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ABSTRACT

Using an action research model, this study concentrated on easing the transition into school by providing an induction program for preschool children which promotes the emotional needs of the child within the family. The research followed an ecological perspective, considering individual needs within the frameworks of school, home, and community in England. Research included a model of "plan, do, review, and replan." Information was obtained from transcribed interviews, storytelling sessions at school, home visits, and an overall evaluation. Results shows that a parent-centered approach, incorporating a partnership model and addressing rights of passage, effectively meets the needs of all involved in the transition to school. Rites of separation were eased by a gradual introduction to school one day per week. Home visits and storytelling were crucial transitional activities. By supplying a set of materials to be used at home (playpacks), the school was offering a sense of belonging to the child and family. Each playpack has a different theme, with an emphasis on play, and examples include science, number, language activities, listening skills, drama, art, visual discrimination, sequencing and fine motor skills. The research had the following impacts on practice: (1) barriers were broken down; (2) partnerships with parents were formed; (3) children felt more settled at school; (4) quality relationships were formed; and (5) early identification of special educational needs took place. Contains 11 references.) (JW)

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THE POWER AND PASSION OF PLAYPACKS

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Paper presented at the Fifth European Conference on the Quality of Early Childhood Education.

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Summary

Children starting school bring a variety of experiences with them. The majority of them have already spent time away from home in playgroups, nurseries, or with child minders, therefore have already made the first transition. However, for some children and their families the transition into school produces feelings of extreme anxiety and stress.

This paper identifies various methods of easing the transition into school by providing an induction programme for pre-school children which facilitates the emotional needs of the child within the family.

The development of a pack of materials to be shared at home has enabled whole families to become involved in learning processes within an early years curriculum.

The school has become a central part of the childs world, becoming more exciting each week, when fear of the unknown has been eliminated and the reception class teacher has become familiar to both parents and children. Fears and anxieties have been erased and new friendships have been formed before the transition into school.

By using a collaborative approach with parents and addressing individual needs, within a carefully planned and managed programme of interaction, the children and parents within this study made a positive transition into school.

THEORETICAL BASIS

The research is embedded within an ecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) where individual needs are considered within the framework of home, school and community.

The process of this systematic and critical action research enquiry undertaken within the school and childrens homes, depicts my own grounded theory and theory in use, which supports a holistic view of the child and family.

Rationale

Parenting today is a demanding and at times a stressful, lonely and frustrating experience. The parents in the nineteen nineties are bringing up their children in families and within a society which many of their grandparents would find difficulty in recognising. One in four marriages end in divorce, one in eight families are headed by a single parent and one in three marriages are a remarriage for one of the partners (Pugh, 1987) (Bradshaw, 1990). The implications of these statistics for schools are that thousands of children are growing up in reconstituted or blended families, or with only one parent, information which becomes relevant when considering the child within his/her own eco system. Just as every child is unique, so is every eco system; disharmony within a system creates discordence which can adversely affect the childs general or specific area of development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Adopting this much broader perspective of the child within the home-community moves towards an understanding of what really happens to children in the context of the systems in which they live. Therefore visiting the children within the context of their own homes, talking to their parents and brothers and sisters, gave me insights which I would not have

otherwise perceived. A bond of mutual trust and care between myself and the home was established and when the children started school I could recall their names instantly.

By promoting more positive home school links there is likely to be a reduction in tensions which some families feel in relation to school (Bastiani, 1989). There are parents who have unhappy recollections of their own school days and so feel intimidated when their child begins school. These parents benefit greatly from a sensitive approach which in turn enhances their childs transition from home to school. If the child perceives co-operation between the important people within their world, they are more likely to make a secure transition and these relationships are critical within early schooldays. Research by Elizur (1986) states that the most significant factor affecting whether a child settles into school or not, is the emotional state of the mother.

Methodology

An action research model was operated PLAN - DO - REVIEW - REPLAN, which entailed compiling the playpacks, operating storytime sessions in school, a home visiting programme and an evaluation of the whole process.

Compiling for Playpacks

Many educationalists consider that it is too late to exploit parental interest when children have started school, because by then parents feel that they have given responsibility for the education of their children to teachers (Wolfendale, 1989) However, Cleave et al (1989) state that positive relationships between parents and schools must begin before the child starts school.

It is important to be clear about the objectives of the scheme, which are embedded in a belief in child-centred, or child within home-community centred learning and the importance of the 3 C's but also for effective collaboration between teacher and parents.

Aims of Playpacks

1. To provide some stimulus materials for parents and children to explore together.

2. To suggest appropriate experiences that will help develop skills, whilst explaining in appropriate terminology.

3. To increase parental awareness of experiences and skills needed within the reception class.

4. To provide a link towards transition from home to school.

5. To give the child a 'sense of belonging' to the school community.

6. To encourage and foster parental involvement in the education of their child.

7. To offer a parent-centred approach (by partnership).

i. helping parents to extend their horizons
ii. To help them gain confidence
iii. To inform and communicate with parents in a way that acknowledges the partnership
iv. To encourage them to be involved in classroom management

However, it soon became apparent that the playpacks themselves were acting as a tool - a link - highly symbolic, between the home and school. A far more powerful interaction than I had originally planned.

PRACTICAL APPLICATION

Compiling the Set of Materials

The playpack materials need to be visually attractive and inviting - appealing both to young children and their parents.

Durability

Plastic zipped wallets in which to house the contents. This would help preserve the materials and allow children to inspect the copies without actually having to take them out.

Funding

An initial donation of £50 allowed me to purchase suitable materials. The playpacks cost approximately £6.00 per pack to compile.

Aesthetic Appearance/Contents

If the packs were to be stimulating enough for a weeks loan, they needed to include as many activities as possible to keep the child interested. I began with a storybook and tried to fit the activities around this theme.

Parental Involvement

When I had completed 12 packs I enlisted the help of parents, otherwise I would not have completed the required 25 in time for the January intake into school. Some parents decided to develop their own games, others required more guidance and others said they could not make anything but were willing to collect wrapping paper (for board games) or laminate any of the completed materials.

Presentation Guidelines

Once the contents had been completed the more practical aspects of the packs required consideration. There needed to be contained within each wallet an information sheet which listed the contents and gave parents instructions for their use.

Ownership

I required something visually attractive, but informative and colourful. I decided to use the logo from my previous degree research and rename the packs 'And so to School Packs'. The completed packs were smart, colourful and original.

Operational Procedures

Each wallet was numbered and logged in a record book. Parents were to sign out each pack weekly. Helping parents and the P.T.A. committee managed the process and provided refreshments in school for the parents, whilst the children went with their prospective reception class teacher, for storytime sessions.

The themes of the playpacks have been carefully chosen using an early years curriculum of learning through play (Dowling, 1988, Bruce, 1988, 1991 and Pugh, 1992) parents using the material with their child were to be the facilitators, encouraging the child to develop their natural curiosity and self-awareness. This natural partnership between child and parent presents an interactionist approach to language acquisition. When they share the story books and games there would be shared meanings through discussion.

Each playpack has a different theme and examples include science, number, language activities, listening skills, drama, art, visual discrimination, sequencing and fine motor skills, all incorporated in fun packed activities. If required the contents could be dovetailed to the N.C. but I have purposely avoided this in order to incorparate an affective curriculum with emphasis upon play.

PLAYPACKS IN ACTION

The Friday afternoon meetings of pre-school children and parents for storytime sessions became a focal point of the study. It appeared, from parental comments that there is a necessity to consider the needs of parents within the transition process. Others who were new to the school felt more isolated - and 'outside' of a group, even though all children were beginning school.

Voices

Parent 1 *I didn't know any of the other mums at all - but I've been talking to a few on Fridays when we exchange the playpacks. I don't feel so isolated now.*

Parent 2: *The mums get to know each other, will stand together in groups and look forward to meeting each other before school and at 3 o'clock. When your child moves to a new class you feel 'funny' because you have to form new groups again and become confident with the teacher. I can imagine what a child feels like.*

(This parent confided that she had been bullied as a child at school)

These Friday sessions have become part of a Starting School Policy - along with home visiting.

Playpacks as a Vehicle in Transition

Parent 3: *His older brother has enjoyed using the packs with him. He reads the stories, in fact it has increased his self esteem as he thought he was the teacher.*

The playpacks have provided a sense of belonging for parent and child. They enabled me to get to know individual families.

Major Findings

By offering a parent-centred approach which incorporates a partnership model and addresses the rites of passage, the needs of all concerned were more effectively met. Parents and children became more confident with the school, barriers were crossed and bonds formed, which made starting school a more positive experience.

Photographic analysis and the use of parental diaries provided triangulation. The photographs provided evidence and principles of interaction, analysis and learning. The feedback via the diaries provided me with reinforcement and evidence of parental interest. This was part of my process of formative evaluation.

The rites of separation (child leaving home) were met by the gradual introduction to school on Fridays. Transitions were commented upon during the home visits. Responses highlighted the fact that home visits and storytime sessions were a crucial transitional activity for all involved.

Incorporations

These particular rites of passage were addressed by the use of playpacks. By supplying a set of materials to be used at home the school was offering a sense of belonging to the child and family.

Implications for Practice

- Barriers have been broken down.
- Partnership with parents undertaken.
- Children more settled in school
- Quality relationships formed
- Early identification of Special Educational Needs

Action research deliberately encourages change and any form of change is unsettling, controversial and tension producing. Within the present political climate of change and unrest, it is often difficult to encourage and implement in school strategies. However, schools need to address the notion that children 'simply adjust to school'. Some children do not, their emotional needs remain unmet and the stress caused has a direct effect upon their cognitive skills. Schools cannot become complacent and school effectiveness necessitates change processes which require teachers to understand the dynamics of change in order to manage the developmental processes involved.

This research reflects the values and attitudes of me, a reception class teacher and lecturer in early childhood, who has endeavoured to improve the quality of starting school for young children in the community. The needs of both parents and children have been highlighted during this collaborative process and I know that the children and families who have taken part in this study have had a more positive introduction to school than in previous years. The implications for such a statement of validity are

1. self-validation
2. peer validation
3. learner validation

Validation equals confirmation through well grounded research. In my case I can recall previous years intakes and compare with the children in this study. I have been able to reflect in action, on action, about action.

The home visiting programme and the use of playpacks has now become enshrined in school policy and brings the school and community into partnership. The lives of future reception class children will be enhanced when they use and participate in the process of

'And so to School Playpacks'

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The packs contain a story book and activities which can be shared together with your child.

When you read the book together remember:-

Books are fun.

Pictures are important.

Stop and talk about them.

Take time to enjoy them together.

Talk about the story.

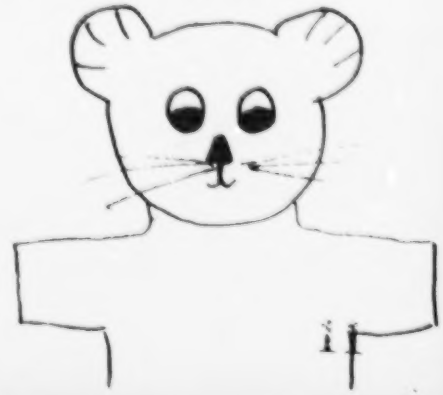
Try to choose a time when your child is not hungry, upset or tired.

Find a quiet place and switch off the television.

Always praise your child for any attempts at repeating numbers or rhymes.

Puppets

Allow your child to use the puppet in any way, perhaps retelling the story or making up their own version.



You do not need to do all the activities in the packs in one session.

The "And so to school packs" have been compiled to allow children and their parents to share a fun time together, and at the same time make learning a pleasurable activity.

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